

David “Carbine” Williams and the Invention of the M1 Carbine*

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David Marshall Williams was born in Godwin, Cumberland County, at the turn of the twentieth century. He was the son of a well-to-do landowner. Williams was fascinated by weapons from an early age. He built his first pistol—with a reed barrel — when he was only ten years old. His greatest discoveries, however, would come to him later in an unexpected place—Caledonia Prison Farm in Halifax County.

As a young man working for a railroad company, Williams began to make and sell moonshine, or illegal alcohol, on the side. The police tried repeatedly to shut down his bootlegging operation. Things finally ended with a shootout between Williams and law enforcement officers during a raid on his whiskey still. Deputy sheriff Al Pace was killed. Williams was convicted of murder but maintained his innocence until the day he died. At twenty years old, he was sentenced to thirty years of hard time.



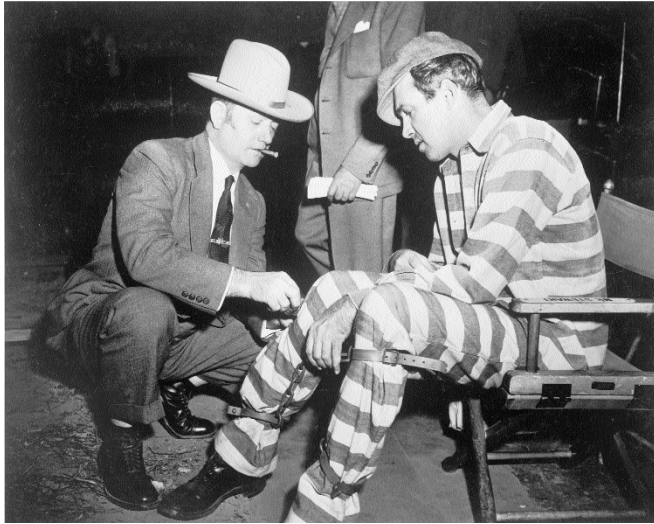
David Marshall “Carbine” Williams.
*Image courtesy of the State Archives,
North Carolina Office of Archives and
History.*

After a rocky start in prison, Williams settled in and eventually became a “trustee,” a prisoner who had the warden’s trust. He began working in the prison blacksmith shop repairing equipment. It was there he started creating his own gun inventions from scrap metal. In 1929, after Williams had served eight years, his case was reviewed and he was pardoned. He returned to Godwin, where he built a one-room workshop and continued working on weapon innovations.

When World War II broke out, the U.S. military needed a weapon to combat the new fighting tactics of German forces. Support troops needed guns that were lighter than standard service rifles so that they could go about their normal duties. But they also needed guns that were more effective in combat than the pistols they had been using. The Ordnance Department asked for design proposals from both military and civilian designers.

Williams at the time was working for Winchester Repeating Firearms Company in Connecticut. Winchester decided at the last minute to enter a light rifle prototype in the competition. An important part of this rifle was Williams’s short-stroke gas piston, which he had worked on in prison. After several weeks of tests and a number of modifications,

Winchester's entry, the Carbine Caliber .30 M1, was adopted as the standard rifle for military service.



Oscar-winning actor Jimmy Stewart played Carbine Williams in a 1952 movie about his life. Williams visited Stewart on the movie set. *Image courtesy of the State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History.*

The M1 carbine, as it came to be known, went from a design on paper to a weapon in the hands of soldiers in less than a year. Companies such as General Motors, Underwood-Elliott-Fisher (which made typewriters), Rock-Ola Manufacturing Company (which made jukeboxes), National Postal Meter, and IBM made more than six million M1 carbines from 1941 to 1945. General Douglas MacArthur once called the weapon “one of the strongest contributing factors in our victory in the Pacific.”

Although he held more than fifty patents, Williams is best remembered for the gun that gave him his nickname.



In 1971 David Marshall “Carbine” Williams donated his Godwin shop and nearly 3,000 artifacts to the North Carolina Museum of History. Museum visitors can view the shop—built by the Williams family around 1930—see examples of Williams’s work, and learn more about the inventor, who died in 1975. *Image courtesy of the State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History.*

**This article, provided by the North Carolina Museum of History staff, first appeared in the Raleigh News and Observer as part of the Newspapers in Education program. Access <http://www.newsobserver.com/nie> for more on that program.*